

WL 5235



the
PLANETS
OPUS 32
gustav holst

SIR ADRIAN BOULT CONDUCTING
THE PHILHARMONIC PROMENADE ORCH.

LONDON PHILHARMONIC CHOIR

A NIXA RECORDING

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GUSTAV HOLST THE PLANETS, Op. 32

LONDON PHILHARMONIC CHOIR
Chorus Master: FREDERICK JACKSON

PHILHARMONIC PROMENADE ORCHESTRA
Leader: JOSEPH SHADWICK

Conducted by SIR ADRIAN BOULT

Gustavus Theodore Holst was an Englishman of Swedish antecedents whose music respected no terrestrial boundaries. In a manner of speaking, he had both feet on the ground but his head was in the stars.

This confession by an admiring contemporary is pertinent: "Over-scoring has always been one of my vices and it arises, I am convinced, from the fact that I am not always sure enough of myself and have not the courage of my convictions, and that I must hide my nakedness with an apron of orchestration. Holst's orchestra could be naked and unashamed."

Such compliments do not come easily from Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Holst would have treasured it.

And yet the object of this praise was a man who could, and did, dedicate himself to the proposition that there is consummate logic in, of all things, astrology. It is a fact, moreover, that *The Planets* all but owes its existence to this most irrational of the common avocations.

The composer's daughter Imogen has insisted: "Horoscopes had nothing to do with the writing of *The Planets*, and once he had taken the underlying idea from astrology, he let the music have its way with him." Be that as it may, the metaphysical implications of star gazing admittedly preoccupied Holst through most of his years.

Just when *The Planets* was beginning to take shape in his mind, indeed, he wrote a friend that "recently the character of each planet suggested lots to me." Presumably the music embodies these insights. Considered in its own terms, the score represents a clear triumph of art over mysticism.

The better part of *The Planets* was completed in Holst's weekend home during World War I, which was a charming cottage of some three hundred years' vintage atop a Thaxted, Essex, hill. Sometimes he worked in his soundproof room at St. Paul's Girls' School, whose students, with those of Morley College, claimed the bulk of his waking hours throughout a long and distinguished pedagogical career.

Two years after the Armistice, when all of the seven movements of *The Planets* were given together for the first time, Holst submitted this statement to the London press: "These pieces were suggested by the astrological significance of the planets; there is no programme music in them, neither have they any connection with the deities of classical mythology bearing the same name. If any guide to the music is required the sub-title to each piece will be found sufficient, especially if it be used in a broad sense. For instance, Jupiter brings jollity in the ordinary sense, and also the more ceremonial type of rejoicing associated with religious or national festivities. Saturn brings not only physical decay, but also a vision of fulfilment. Mercury is the symbol of mind."

Beyond this deponent sayeth not, but that did not stop the annotators. Edward Evans, writing in the *Musical Times*, offered the most acute observation. On the evidence, he concluded, *The Planets* "has outrun the dimensions of a suite, and become a cycle of tone poems."

Catalogued as *Opus 32*, the several tableaux were of course conceived as an entity and are published as one omnibus work. Boosey & Hawkes has made available an excellent miniature score, albeit a rather crowded one. The orchestration calls for all the usual strings plus four flutes, two piccolos, a bass flute, three oboes, a bass oboe, an English horn, three clarinets, a bass clarinet, three bassoons, a contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, a tenor tuba, a bass tuba, six timpani, a triangle, a side drum, a bass drum, a tambourine, cymbals, a gong, bells, a glockenspiel, a celesta, a xylophone, two harps, and an organ—in addition to which the final section enlists an offstage women's chorus.

The first planet depicted is *Mars, The Bringer of War*. A single strongly rhythmical figure pervades. Trumpets and horns proclaim the subject, lurching into a relentless five-four meter that sweeps and swells until it must stop or explode. The pressure slackens only long enough to gather new momentum, again and again, until finally, to paraphrase Richard Capell, the monster barks the last measure of its defiance to an empty heaven.

In contrast, we next meet *Venus, The Bringer of Peace*. Only her high Uranian personification is recognized; she can bestow nothing but blessings. A gentle horn call signals her presence, rising a fourth to summon the flutes from on high. Soft chords chime in the clean upper air, and the oboe sings an exquisite song. Harmonics on the harp wish the lady well, and stratospheric notes in the violins see her safely to the heights.

With *Mercury, The Winged Messenger* we come to the nub of Holst's theosophy, but never long enough to define it. If there is a concept of mind in this scherzo it is nothing more esoteric than our old friend *Escape*. The messenger bears no burden; he doesn't know where he is going or why. A simple figure, now rising, now falling, darts among the instruments. The woodwinds descend chordal steps to nowhere against a rhythmic accompaniment in the violins. The solo violin manages yet another theme before the end, which is chirped by the woodwinds against a high held note in the strings.

Now the stage is set for *Jupiter, The Bringer of Jollity*. This movement often is programmed independently, for good reason. One authority has suggested that it "might have been called an overture for an English country festival. On this holiday, on this green



SIR ADRIAN BOULT

Adrian Cedric Boult was born in Chester in 1889 and was educated at Westminster and Christ Church, Oxford, where he came in close contact with Sir Hugh Allen, at that time Professor of Music. After taking his degree, he continued his musical studies at Leipzig, where he had the opportunity of making a close study of the methods of the famous German conductor, Artur Nikisch. On returning to England he gave some orchestral concerts in Liverpool, but it was as conductor of some of the Royal Philharmonic Society's concerts in 1918-1919 that he first attracted general attention. In the latter year he joined the staff of the Royal College of Music and took charge of the conducting and score-reading class, and later on was entrusted with the direction and training of the College Orchestra.

His first big appointment came in 1924, as Conductor of the City of Birmingham Orchestra, a post which he held until 1930, when he became Director of Music to the BBC and Conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. He was responsible for their formation and training from the start, developing them into an orchestra of the highest class, and together they rose to world fame.

He has toured frequently abroad, both with the BBC Orchestra and as a guest conductor. In the early 'twenties, he went to Germany, Czecho-Slovakia and Austria, mainly to introduce to continental audiences some of the more important works of British composers (indeed, throughout his career he has been a champion of British music, his performances of works by—for instance—Elgar and Vaughan Williams being definitive). He conducted a programme of British music at the Salzburg Festival of 1935, and visited the United States for the first time as guest conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He has since returned many times to the States and was in charge of the premiere of Arthur Bliss's Piano Concerto at the New York World Fair of 1939. His work in connection with British music was recognized by the conferring of a knighthood in 1937. He was entrusted with the conducting of the music at the Coronation of King George VI, and Queen Elizabeth II.

On terminating his association with the BBC in 1950, Sir Adrian immediately took up the position of Principal Conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

meadow, all men are friends." The key, naturally, is C major. The horns usher in the first of five themes they are to welcome, as if to present the competing guilds in a pageant. The successive tunes go their way in the best rustic manner. One of them, the slowest, has been called an "exalted folksong" by Eric Blom. It is in fact known otherwise as a hymn, the opening words of which are "I vow to thee my country. . . ." But there is no hint of churchly ritual in this earthy setting. The games are the thing, and no mistake, until scales and arpeggios tell us that the happy day is done.

There is a modicum of philosophizing in *Saturn, The Bringer of Old Age*. The same instruments that paid homage to Venus now are heard again but, to borrow another remark from Capell, "the harmonies tell how changed the season and sere the leaf." Two syncopated chords of the ninth are reiterated through twenty-six bars, as if Holst were looking Father Time straight in the eye. Flutes, horns, bells and harps extend the ultimate resignation over fifty *pianissimo* bars.

All of the universe resounds to the cosmic pranks of *Uranus, The Magician*. Trumpets and trombones hint at his slightly pompous nature, but they fall a foil to his wizardry along with every other segment of the orchestra. Whole worlds of people, as it were, he makes to disappear in a trice—a mighty chord of C, lent finality by a glissando on the organ, brings us suddenly from *ffff* to *pp*, with nothing but a ghostly quiver of strings to fill the void. And then, just as he whisked his playthings away, he whisks them back again unharmed. The magician tires, and the demonstration is over.

The apotheosis, such as it is, is contained in *Neptune, The Mystic*. Scott Goddard has described this section as "the most individual and inimitable of the set," and there can be no argument. The music provides no answers; it only asks questions. Everything is *pianissimo*, and we stand at the shore of infinite waters as if to inquire of the horizon: Whence? Whither? Why? When the *Andante* has become, almost imperceptibly, an *Allegretto*, the choir is heard on a high G, and the flute and clarinet seem to urge it on. A song does come, but it is wordless; the six-part writing has an indeterminate tonality, implying perhaps an utterance for which speech will not suffice. The music grows more and more faint, and at length the choir is beyond our ears. The impression lingers that they were still singing when last we could hear them, and always have been, and always will, because the song has no end.

This Recording is one of a series of Recordings which were made in England by Westminster in the Fall of 1953 in conjunction with Nixa Records.

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Gustav Holst

THE PLANETS, OP. 32

Philharmonic Promenade Orchestra

Conducted by Sir Adrian Boult

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SIDE ONE
XTV 20373
Made in U.S.A.

1. Mars, The Bringer of War
2. Venus, The Bringer of Peace
3. Mercury, The Winged Messenger

33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM
LONG PLAYING

NATURAL BALANCE

UNAUTHORIZED PUBLIC PERFORMANCE, BROADCASTING AND COPYING OF THIS RECORD PROHIBITED

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Gustav Holst

THE PLANETS, OP. 32

London Philharmonic Choir

Philharmonic Promenade Orchestra

Conducted by Sir Adrian Boult

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SIDE TWO
XTV 20374
Made in U.S.A.

4. Jupiter, The Bringer of Jollity
5. Saturn, The Bringer of Old Age
6. Uranus, The Magician
7. Neptune, The Mystic

33 1/3 RPM
LONG PLAYING

NATURAL BALANCE

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